

Convent of Mary Immaculate  
Truman Avenue  
Key West  
Monroe County  
Florida

HABS No. FL-184

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FLA,  
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PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

## HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. FL-184

## CONVENT OF MARY IMMACULATE

Location: Southeast side of Truman Avenue between the 600 and 700 blocks. Key West, Monroe County, Florida.

USGS Key West Quadrangle, Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates: 17.419360.2715380.

Present Owner: The Order of the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary (Mother Provincial, 1061 New Scotland Road, Albany, New York, 12208.)

Present Occupant: Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary.

Present Use: School and Convent.

Significance: The Convent of Mary Immaculate is the oldest educational institution in Southern Florida. The school opened in 1869 and has been located in the present building since 1875. The building is an excellent example of late nineteenth century architecture designed for religious purposes and serving both the living needs of its occupants and the educational needs of the larger community.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

## A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1875.
2. Architect: Attributed to William Kerr.
3. Original and subsequent owners: Mother Theresa of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary, of the Convent of Mary Immaculate, purchased at Public Auction Lots 8 and 9, part of Tract 12, of the Island of Key West, the property consisting of 8.55 undeveloped acres on June 8, 1874. (Abstract, Monroe Land Title Company.)
4. Builder, contractor, suppliers: Not known, but possibly William Kerr, who was a supplier as well as a builder (Bensel's Key West City Directory, 1888.) The U.S. Government permitted the stone used in the construction to be quarried from government property (Cappick, Key West Citizen, October 24, 1938).
5. Original plan and construction: A three-and-a-half story octagonal structure with a mansard roof and cupola. The octagon is flanked by two-and-a-half story wings.

6. Alterations and additions: During the Spanish American War, a frame wing was added to the rear of the building, and several wooden out-buildings were built. In 1904, the Convent was enlarged to almost double its size when the northeast wing was built. A steeple was added to balance the design. (Cappick, Key West Citizen, October 24, 1938).

In 1950, original shutter doors were replaced by glass jalousies.

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

The Convent of Mary Immaculate was established by the Sisters of Holy Name of Jesus and Mary of Montreal, Canada. The Sisters were not only responsible for operating the Convent but provided schools for Spanish speaking children and Negroes.

During the severe epidemics that swept the island during the early days, the Sisters volunteered to serve as nurses. With the sinking of the Battleship Maine, they turned the convent over to the United States Government for its use as a military hospital. Casualties from the torpedoed boat Winslow, and others, were treated here. (Cappick, Key West Citizen, October 24, 1938.)

C. Sources of Information:

1. Old views: Photo of Convent of Mary Immaculate before addition of northeast wing, Crain, Horatio, Key West, Florida, Photogravure. The Albertype Co., New York, 1896.

2. Bibliography:

- a. Primary and unpublished sources:

Monroe Land Title Company Abstract, Key West, Florida.  
Convent of Mary Immaculate Records, Key West, Florida.

- b. Secondary and published sources:

American Guide Series, W.P.A. Writer's Program, A Guide to Key West, Hastings House, New York, 1949.

Browne, Jefferson B., Key West the Old and the New, The Record Company, St. Augustine Florida, 1912. pp. 23, 148, 149.

Cappick, Marie, "The Key West Story." The Coral Tribune, Key West, Florida, August 9, 1957, p. 10; August 16, 1957, p.4.

Cappick, Marie, "Convent Celebrates 70th Anniversary." Key West Citizen, Key West, Florida, October 24, 1938.

Maloney, Walter., Sketch of the History of Key West, Florida.  
Advertisers Printing House, New Jersey, 1876, p. 40, 41.

3. Likely sources not yet investigated: Records and drawings may exist in the Mother House of the Order of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary, 1061 New Scotland Road, Albany, New York 12208.

Prepared by: Betty M. Bruce  
Old Island Restoration  
Foundation, Inc.  
Project Historian  
HABS Key West Project  
September 1966

## PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

### A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: This structure is an excellent example of late nineteenth century architecture for religious purposes, a convent providing both for the living needs of its occupants and educational needs of the community. Of special interest are the mansard roof; cupola and spires; balustrades and related trim; and exterior stairway.
2. Condition of fabric: The fabric is in poor condition.

### B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: A three-and-a-half story central octagon, 40' across flanked by two-and-a-half story wings. The total length is 270'. A recent ell addition is not included in the survey.
2. Foundations: Limestone.
3. Wall construction: Quarried limestone, stucco finish scored to simulate ashlar masonry, weathered patina, vents in wall to provide under-floor ventilation.
4. Structural system: Load bearing masonry walls, post and lintel, modified truss, some mortise and tenon joinery; cast iron columns in octagonal space which served as parlor, floriated capitals.
5. Porches: Porches at ground, principal and second floors; porch at ground level defined by cement walks, columns with chamfered corners on masonry base, and beams with beaded edges and underside of wood floor of porch above. Porches at principal and second levels have balustrades of turned wood balusters painted white. Porch columns create illusion of projecting from ground to above top railing, capped with turned wood finial in urn pattern. "Y"-shaped flying wood stairway from ground to principal level. Balustrade same as porch.

6. Openings:

- a. Doorways and doors: Rounded arched doorways with simulated key-stones in masonry walls at ground and principal floor; fans of four to six lights above transom bar. Modern doors have replaced the original ones. Fragments indicate two doors per opening, two panels glazed, one wood; wood louvered shutters, two per opening, opened out; fixed semi-circular shutter above doorway.
- b. Windows: Modern jalousie windows have replaced original. Dormer windows have two jalousie windows per opening; dormers in equilateral dome below spire have one jalousie window.

7. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: Mansard roof with wood shingle covering over wings and octagon. Terne plate shingles painted silver over equilateral dome and spire.
- b. Cornice: Boxed cornice, simple classical moldings.
- c. Dormers, cupola and spire: Gable dormers on mansard roof of spire and octagon space.

Octagonal wood cupola above roof on octagon space, pointed arch openings, railing, panels above arches decorated with perforations in lineal pattern.

Octagonal spire with cross finial.

8. Cistern: concrete cisterns located at northeast and northwest corners project above grade, concrete covers.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans:

- a. Ground floor: All major interior spaces extend across short dimensions of the building, affording cross ventilation, connected by doorways between rooms or by exterior porches.
- b. First or principal floor: Similar to ground floor; the octagonal space near the southwest end of the building recently served as a parlor; the chapel was in the spaces to the northeast.
- c. Second floor: Similar to ground and principal floor; the octagonal space above the parlor was apparently used as a reading room; balance of spaces used as living quarters divided by fixed movable screens.

2. Stairways:

- a. Principal stairway, ground to first floor: "L" shaped stair, the turning determined by the adjacent octagonal space; turned wood newel and balusters, molded hand rail; tension rod at mid-point, long run.
- b. Stairway between first and second floor: Similar to stairway described above, stringer decoration at wall.
- c. Secondary stairway near northeast end of building serving first and second floors: Straight run with intermediate landing; details similar to ground to first floor stairway.

3. Flooring: Wood boards, composition tile.

4. Walls and ceiling finish: Wood boards and strips, flush joints, painted, some acoustical tile and fiber board.

5. Doorways and doors:

Parlor doorways and doors: Access opening; two paneled doors, six wood panels, six glazed in upper part of door.

6. Notable hardware: Fragments of door hardware, including keepers.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The building faces northwest and is surrounded by a wide variety of tropical trees and shrubs.
2. Outbuildings: Ell addition, one story with porches, gable roof, projects from the southeast side of the building (not included in this survey).

Modern buildings (circa 1965) housing convent functions are situated nearby.

Prepared by: F. Blair Reeves, AIA  
Supervisory Architect  
HABS Key West Project  
June 1967

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

These records were prepared in 1967 during a summer project jointly sponsored by the Old Island Restoration Foundation, Inc. of Key West, and the Historic American Buildings Survey. Twenty-two structures were recorded, ranging from commercial structures, residences and hospitals to a convent, a lighthouse, and the Memorial to the Victims of the Disaster of the U.S. Battleship Maine.

The project was under the direction of F. Blair Reeves, AIA, Associate Professor, Department of Architecture, University of Florida. Measured drawings were prepared by student architects John D. Davenport and John F. Grimm of Texas A. and M. University, and John O. Crosby of the University of Florida. Mrs. Betty M. Bruce of the Old Island Restoration Foundation, Inc., and Professor Reeves were responsible for the historical and architectural data. They were assisted by members of the Foundation. J. Franks Brooks, Photographer, of Key West, supplied the photographs.